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13 March 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : The Mini-Crisis over the Bundesversammlung

1. The West Germans, like others involved in the recent tug-of-war over holding the Federal Assembly in West Berlin, have been puzzled by the curious sequence of events involving the Soviet missions in Bonn and East Berlin and the East German regime. At this point, they can only speculate about the coherence of Soviet policy on Berlin and the nature of the relationship between Moscow and Pankow. These developments, however, are likely to give new impetus to reexamining the old assumptions about the client-state relationship between Moscow and Pankow, and there may be increased readiness to concede to East Germany a more important role in the Soviet Union's policies and planning with respect to Europe.

2. It is still too early to predict with any degree of accuracy the longer-term effects of these developments on West German politics. But it might not be unreasonable to expect a strengthening of the hand of those in West Germany who maintain that Bonn, in pursuing its policy toward the East, cannot continue to ignore the existence of East Germany or the important military and economic role it plays in central and eastern Europe. In the wake of this most recent crisis over Berlin, Foreign Minister Brandt has already publicly declared that it is "unrealistic" to bypass the government in East Berlin by direct contact with the Soviet Union." In Brandt's view, "the GDR today plays too important a role in the Warsaw Pact."

Orig to D/OCS
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State Dept. review completed

3. This view may appeal to a growing number of Socialists and Free Democrats who are anxious to breathe new life into Bonn's eastern policy which has been stalemated since the occupation of Czechoslovakia last summer. Although there are no clear signs yet that the question of Bonn's relations with East Germany will be a major issue in the September national elections, the campaign may provide a good sounding board for these elements to publicize their views. This in turn could lead to sharpening the differences now existing between the Christian Democrats, who generally favor a firmer line toward East Germany, and the Socialists and Free Democrats who tend to be somewhat more flexible on matters concerning relations with the other half of Germany.

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In the following paragraphs we attempt to recapitulate some of the more significant developments leading up to the Federal Assembly as they may have been viewed from Bonn and West Berlin.

4. Many Germans are inclined to believe that the Soviets from the very beginning of this latest "crisis" over Berlin did not favor actions that might increase East-West tensions and cast a cloud over relations between Moscow and Washington. At the same time, the Soviets were faced with the need to repay a debt to the East German regime for its unwavering support during the Czech crisis last summer. Faced with this situation it was not surprising that the Soviet propaganda machinery consistently supported the East German view that the Federal Assembly session was provocative and that Bonn (and the West Berliners) would have to bear the unspecified consequences if the meeting were held in the city. The Soviets were undoubtedly also aware that official opinion in West Germany was divided over the wisdom of holding the election in West Berlin and that these doubts continued to persist even after the official announcement on 18 December selecting West Berlin. Moscow may have expected Bonn to back down and hold the meeting elsewhere once it became apparent that East Germany and the Soviets were prepared to escalate the war of nerves over this question.

5. As the election approached and there were still no clear signs that Bonn intended to yield, the Soviets began to crank up their diplomatic machinery. During

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January and February there were numerous contacts between Soviet ambassadors Tsarapkin (Bonn) and Abrasimov (East Berlin) and various West German and West Berlin officials. In all these meetings the Soviets generally took a hard line, seeking to persuade the West Germans to change the site of the election while offering no concrete concessions in return. The Soviets did try to mollify the West Germans by holding out the prospect of improved relations between Bonn and Moscow if the decision were made to hold the election elsewhere.

6. Although Bonn officials continued to vacillate and privately express doubts about the wisdom of holding the meeting in West Berlin, no West German leader seemed willing to assume the onus for advocating postponement or transfer of the election. By mid-February, with the election only a few weeks away, the Soviets intensified their diplomatic activity. They were supported by the East Germans who began to make noises about a possible Easter pass agreement if Bonn were to change the venue of the election. In the meantime, however, Chancellor Kiesinger and other high West German officials had decided to hold out for such specific concessions as passes for 4-5 holiday periods (rather than just Easter) and lifting of the 1968 prohibition on travel of West German officials to West Berlin.

8. It was during the last week of February when intensive contacts were being pursued in Bonn, West Berlin, and East Berlin that it began to appear that the Soviets and the East Germans were not entirely in step. There were even some signs that the Soviets were quietly trying to nudge the East Germans into

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offering additional concessions which might break the deadlock between Bonn and East Germany. If indeed the Soviets were trying to influence the East Germans to compromise, it became apparent by the end of February that Moscow's efforts were having little success. Bonn was still holding out for a firm offer of an extended pass period, while the East Germans continued to insist that the election would first have to be moved out of West Berlin before negotiations could proceed on matters relating to passes.

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As it turned out, the East Germans had little new to offer and still seemed to be waiting for concessions from the Western side. Pankow would grant passes to West Berliners at Easter and would also be willing to enter into negotiations which might involve additional pass periods but only after the Senat announced that the Federal Assembly would not convene in West Berlin.

10. There is speculation that this was a last-minute ploy by the Soviets to bring East and West Germans together, since it appears that the Soviets had indicated to each that the other had something new to say on the Federal Assembly issue. The Soviets might have hoped that, with both German parties operating under increased pressure as the date for the election drew near, a new meeting might result in a last-minute compromise changing the site of the election. The US embassy in Bonn is inclined to believe that the West Germans would probably have

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called off the election in Berlin in the negotiating situation then pertaining if the East Germans had added Pentecost and Christmas passes to their final proposal of Easter passes along with subsequent negotiations.

11. In any event, Kiesinger, Brandt, Wehner and Schuetz decided that the East German proposal did not go far enough and the GDR negotiator was advised accordingly. The Federal Assembly convened in West Berlin the next day.

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